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Mark 12:28–34

"Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength . . . and your neighbor as yourself."
Mark 12:30, 31

Startle us, O God, with your truth.
Open our hearts and our minds to your word and your love—
so that we might answer by loving you with singleness of purpose
and our neighbors as ourselves,
in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.

I was sitting in the sanctuary of Congregation Sinai, the synagogue two blocks west of here, last Friday evening participating in a Sabbath service. We have a good relationship with Congregation Sinai. They use this sanctuary to celebrate the High Holy Days of Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah every year. It's been going on for about a decade, long enough that members of their congregation have staked out territory in our sanctuary and have their own favorite Presbyterian pews in which they expect to sit—just like many of you do. Congregation Sinai gives us a nice gift every year, sends flowers for our Sunday worship around the Fourth of July, extends hospitality for a Seder during Holy Week, and the use of their facilities for meetings and retreats. My friend Rabbi Michael Sternfield says that, after all, our founder and leader, Jesus of Nazareth, was one of theirs. We are neighbors—good neighbors.

Rabbi Sternfield and his people had invited members of Christian churches in the area who cooperate in a number of ventures to be their guests at a special social action Sabbath service. So I was sitting there, following along in the prayer book, listening to the wonderful lyric sound of Hebrew read by someone who knows how to read Hebrew, praying the beautiful prayers—which felt like Presbyterian prayers frankly. We repeated the Shema, Deuteronomy 6:4–5, which devout Jews have been doing morning and night, daily for thousands of years: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." We prayed our gratitude to God for the sweet gift of life, for the peace of the world, for our neighbors and the stranger in our midst. We stood to reverently thank God for all our dear ones who have gone before us and are now with God. We received the familiar blessing,

“The Lord bless and keep you . . .” People shook hands; husbands and wives kissed. We stepped into the vestibule for a small glass of wine and taste of bread, and then we went out into the darkness of a Friday night in Chicago.

As I walked back to church to get my car, I thought, “That was good; there is nothing about that service that excluded me, nothing I could not affirm, nothing about the faith that Sabbath service represents and the history it reflects that I cannot embrace.” Of course there are differences. We think very differently about who Jesus was. We call him Christ, Messiah, Savior. They call him Jesus of Nazareth, rabbi. But there is so very much about our traditions that is common and so much that addresses the human heart and the human community with a common moral vision. So I was feeling pretty good about it all and about faith and hope and love and the world in general on Friday evening.

I stopped in the office to check my e-mails. You should never do that on a Friday night. I should have known better. What greeted me was an angry message from a Jewish friend of mine about a Presbyterian New Church Development project outside Philadelphia planned, designed to convert Jews to Christianity, cleverly designed even to look like a synagogue, complete with Torah and menorah, to convince Jews to leave their faith community and join ours. Our General Assembly, by the way, has said that our attitude towards Jews should be one of respect and our behavior cooperative and collaborative, not one of religious superiority, not proselytizing and conversion. I was a little embarrassed, frankly, at our lapse and replied to the angry writer that it didn’t reflect my church’s position and I hoped we’d find a way to remedy it.

The next e-mail was about the news of Lt. General William Boykin’s speech at an evangelical Christian church in which he said of a Muslim military leader in Somalia, “I knew my God was bigger than his. I knew that my God was a real God, and his was an idol.” In the name of Christianity, Lt. General Boykin had pretty much dismissed Islam.

That was just before the news broke that one of our local Presbyterian churches fired its musician because he’s gay. And that was before a powerful, well-funded organization within our Presbyterian family announced that there are divisions so deep in our church over that issue, and others, that we can’t go on living together and urged unhappy congregations to essentially drop out and split up the Presbyterian church.

It was quite a comedown, actually, from the hopefulness of that lovely Sabbath service.

What went wrong? What goes wrong with such predictable consistency? How do we get from the gentle, inclusive love of Jesus to people demonizing

one another in the name of their religion? In this week's *Time* magazine essay, Michael Kinsley, commenting on the Lt. General Boykin matter, concluded that religion always, sooner or later, decides that it is superior to other religions and the rest is history. No wonder the world seems weary of traditional institutional religion: all this use of the Bible as a club, appealing to the least attractive of our human characteristics, our incessant ego needs to be first, number one, the center of a universe walled in on all sides by our opinions and prejudice and convictions. How do we get from the common ground Jesus seemed to want to create, where people meet one another in their common humanity, where all barriers are down and people are together—men and women, rich and poor, righteous and sinner, black and white—from that to religion as a compound fortified by doctrine and a narrow ethical, social, and political vision?

The answer is that religion can be and often is hijacked by the basic and base human need to be number one. It happens in all religions, including our own. "Our religion is better than yours. Our God is better than yours. Come to think of it, our God is the real God; yours is a figment of your imagination."

Jesus, I believe, would not be happy. He tried to set the record straight. He said something one day that would, or could if we simply listened to him, forever change the way people thought about religion.

"Good teacher: which commandment is the first of all?" A scribe, a religious teacher himself, asked it. It's a good question. What does God want us to do? What is the moral bedrock on which we can live a Godly life? What is the one commandment that sums up our religion? Jesus' answer is the only answer. Everybody knew it. They all recited it from memory twice daily. It was on the doorpost. They wore it on their foreheads and wrapped it around their wrists: the Shema—"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength." Mark adds "mind" to "heart, soul, and strength," but that's another sermon (about adding "mind" to the equation and thus avoiding all the silliness religious organizations are inclined to do—that's for another day). Here Jesus articulates the bedrock of his, and our, faith: the oneness of God—the radical monotheism of Judaism—and the imperative to human beings to be as human as they can possibly be by loving God with absolute singleness of purpose.

The scribe, being a scribe, is about to ask a follow-up question, I think. The text doesn't say that, but I've spent my life around religious scholarly types, so I know he's going to say, "A follow-up please: Love God, a singular love for God, but how, Jesus, how exactly should one do that? How in the world do you express your love to God?" He knew and we know that there is no shortage of answers. In a sense that's what religion is—an answer to the

“how to love God” question: make sacrifices, kill goats and bulls, build altars, burn them so God can smell the smoke, obey the rules, do this, don’t do that, go to church, sing hymns, say prayers, make a pledge to the Capital Campaign—God really likes that, by the way. But the scribe doesn’t get to ask his follow-up question because Jesus keeps right on going. “The second is this,” he says. The man wanted one, not two. He’s going to get more, whether he wants it or not—which he really doesn’t, because none of us really want to hear this part: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” That’s also in his Bible and ours, by the way, the book of Leviticus.

He’s not the first to put love of God and love of neighbor together. But he is first to and does change the conversation by saying that together they become one command. That changes everything. You can’t do it by yourself, he says. The only way to love God is by loving your neighbor. You have to have neighbors if you’re going to have religion—my religion. Jesus, Walter Brueggemann says, makes one new word out of two: now it’s Godneighbor. And that does change everything.

Love for God tends to be an abstraction, the solitary human pursuit for meaning, individual yearning for oneness with the creator. Love for God has inspired the great mystical traditions in Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and all the great religions of the world, and the important practices of contemplation, meditation, and prayer. But it is essentially a solitary activity.

Love for neighbor without God in the picture inclines toward an admirable humanism, an idealism that does many good things. But alone it doesn’t fare well with big questions, like evil and how human beings get involved in it. And it bumps right into the reality that sometimes it’s very difficult to love your neighbor, especially when your neighbor is not very loveable. After the terrible church bombing in Birmingham, Martin Luther King Jr. wisely said that it’s a good thing Jesus didn’t command us to like our neighbor. Love is bigger than like, and sometimes it takes some outside help to pull it off.

So they belong together as one great commandment. You shall love God with singleness of purpose and your neighbor as yourself.

Reynolds Price has written a new book, *A Serious Way of Wondering: The Ethics of Jesus Imagined.* In it he discusses the popular fad several years ago of wearing bracelets and jewelry bearing the letters WWJD (What Would Jesus Do?) as a moral reminder, a fad widely criticized for being too simple, too certain. Price says there is no better ethical question. “Anyone who today wishes to consider what Jesus might have done at any present crossroads of moral choice could hardly do better than reflect upon a single

command—you shall love your neighbor as yourself." It is, Price says, "a spacious moral vision."

And Elaine Pagels, a scholar who studies the history of human religions, has written a fine new book, *Beyond Belief*, which traces our own Christian beginnings from the perspective of a historian's objectivity. "How is it," she asks, "that Christianity lost that 'spacious moral vision' in a few centuries? How is it that being a Christian became virtually synonymous with accepting a certain set of beliefs? From historical reading I knew that Christianity had survived brutal persecution and flourished for generations —even centuries—before Christians formulated what they believed into creeds" (p. 5).

Early Christianity survived, Pagels concludes, because Christians were doing something new in the world, something no one had ever seen. They were loving their neighbors, not just their family, clan, or tribe. Not even just their fellow Christians, but others, strangers, outsiders, gentiles, pagans, Romans.

Pagels herself returned to the church after her son was diagnosed with an incurable illness and she found herself standing in the vestibule of an Episcopal church on a Sunday morning, warming herself during a morning jog in Manhattan, listening to the hymns and prayers and thinking, "Here is a community that knows how to deal with this."

She writesm "From the beginning what attracted outsiders who walked into a gathering of Christians, as I did on that February morning, was the presence of a group joined by spiritual power into an extended family. Many must have come, as I did, in distress."

They did remarkable, unprecedented things, she says. They contributed money to a common fund to pick up orphans abandoned to die on the streets of Rome and in the garbage dumps. They took food to prisons and stayed behind when the plagues struck, to minister to the sick and dying because Jesus told them to love God by loving their neighbors.

And then Pagels, the academician, probes deeper. It's not that other religions didn't ask people to do plenty of things. "Jupiter and Diana, Isis and Mithras, required their worshipers to offer devotion, pouring out wine, making sacrifices, contributing money to the priests at their temples. Such gods were understood to act, like humans, out of self-interest. But Jews and Christians believe that their God, who created humankind, actually loved the human race and evoked love in return" (p. 9).

Certainly our doctrines are important. We Presbyterians do try to love God with our minds, our intellects. Theology matters to us, a lot. And certainly

our evangelical witness, our expression of the good news of God's love and our invitation to others to share that good news, matters. But what matters most, Jesus said, is a reciprocal love for the God who loves us so much that he sent his only Son to show that love, live and die for that love—a reciprocal love for God that is expressed in love for others, our neighbors.

That's what the church is for: to be an embodiment of that God/neighbor love. That's what we do when we are most faithful to our Lord. Every church. This church. That's the heart of the church: love for God—love for neighbor, the one sitting beside you this morning, the one who lives down the hall and gets on your nerves, the ones up at Congregation Sinai, the ones west of here in Cabrini-Green.

We intend to express our love for our neighbor in our outreach ministries of tutoring and counseling, health care and child care. And we have purchased a piece of property on the edge of Cabrini-Green for a community center that will express neighbor love in practical ways for years to come. The property is an old, abandoned tennis court covered with weeds, trash, and broken glass. Last Saturday, some seventy of us went over to clean it up a bit. I confess I was there only for a half-hour or so. But all day people cut weeds, shoveled, swept, trimmed, bagged the trash, ate a little pizza, had a little worship service, and generally enjoyed the experience of loving neighbors. In the morning, one of our volunteers, a member of our Board of Trustees, a businessman, was working with a shovel near the curb. A well-dressed, African American woman pulled up at the stop sign. She had driven out of Cabrini and was dressed for work. She rolled the window down and looked at this odd group of mostly white people shoveling and raking and cutting and sweeping, took it all in, looked directly at him, and silently mouthed the words, "Thank you."

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A friend of mine, Eileen Linder, tells a story about it. Eileen is a lifelong child advocate and speaks and lobbies and makes a lot of wonderful noise about children. She, with all of us, is dismayed when children suffer. So she was compelled by the story of the mother of one of the youngsters killed in the school shooting at Paducah, Kentucky, a few years ago. When the mother heard that there had been a shooting, she prayed, "Please God, not my child: And if my child, please may he live." When she arrived at the school, she learned that her child was one of the ones who had died. Medical personnel asked the terrible but necessary questions about harvesting and using the child's organs, and the anguished mother agreed.

Months later Eileen read a follow-up story. Somehow the mother discovered the recipient of her child's heart. It turned out to be a minister whose life was saved by the heart transplant. She contacted him, and they visited and talked and wept together and prayed and talked some more. As she rose to leave, she made an unusual but understandable request. Could she please put her ear to his chest and hear her child's heart beating, giving life.

The story reminded Eileen of the church, because she's a minister, I suppose, and in spite of all the embarrassing, sometimes silly, sometimes divisive, harmful things religion does in the world, she—and I, and you too, I'll bet—continue to love the church. The church, the Body of Christ, in which still beats the heart of God's child, Jesus Christ. The church to which God on occasion bends down to listen for the heartbeat.

Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and your neighbor as yourself, he said.

So remember, in Jesus Christ we have seen and experienced the good news that God loves the world, the whole world, all the people in the world. And in him we know, in an immediate and personal way, that God's love for the world includes you. God loves you.

God wants your love, yearns for your love. God knows you will become the person you were created to be when you love God with singleness of purpose.

And God has provided a close-at-hand way for you to do that.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength—and your neighbor as yourself.

Godneighbor. Amen.